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Local Public Service Media in Northern Ireland: the merit goods argument

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Abstract

Public service media in Northern Ireland has long been a focus for scholarly attention, in particular focusing on how the BBC reported on the “Troubles”, a period in history that led to more than 3,500 people being killed. In addressing local public service media services, and those which are accessible in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland, this chapter outlines how public service media maintain and support local journalism in the face of a decline in local newspapers, and discusses the role that they play in supporting cultural minorities through broadcasting for Irish language and Ulster-Scots communities. Theoretically, we primarily draw on Christopher Ali’s argument that local journalism should be considered as a merit good, rather than as a public good, and by applying this to public service media the argument is made for its continued role in maintaining local news provision and in protecting minority languages.

Local Public Service Media in Northern Ireland: the merit goods argument

Introduction

Public service media (PSM) in Northern Ireland (NI) has been subject to significant scholarly attention. In particular, substantial scrutiny exists on how the BBC reported on the “Troubles” (Schlesinger, 1987), and more recently, in terms of how the Corporation serves NI’s divided society (Ramsey, 2016). In this chapter we address both local PSM, and PSM services from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) which are accessible in NI, and consider the role that these organisations play in enhancing the public sphere in two prominent areas. First, we relay how PSM maintain and support local journalism in the face of a decline in local newspapers; and second, we assess the role that PSM play in supporting cultural minorities through broadcasting for Irish language and Ulster-Scots communities. Throughout, we primarily draw on Ali’s (2016) argument that local journalism should be considered as a merit good, rather than as a public good, and apply this specifically to PSM’s role in the public sphere in NI. While we note shortcomings in the PSM approach, we argue for the continuation of PSM in maintaining local news provision and in protecting minority languages, in an era when both are under threat.

Northern Ireland: social, economic and political context

NI is the smallest of the UK’s constituent countries (including England, Scotland and Wales), with a population of 1.8 million. The conflict, colloquially termed “the Troubles” is generally considered to have lasted from 1968 to 1998, and left an indelible mark on society. More than 3,500 people were killed, and while the most severe violence ended some twenty years ago, a modicum of sectarian violence continues and much of NI society remains divided. This is evidenced in education, housing, in the use of public space, and often in public service delivery, which leads to higher public administration costs (eg. in policing) (Wilson, 2016, 14). Inequality and social deprivation persist in many areas, with economic inactivity at 28 per cent, compared to the UK average of 21 per cent (Campbell, 2018). Politically, the NI Assembly and Executive were set up following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998 and established power sharing between Irish Nationalist and (UK) Unionist parties. However, the arrangements reached an impasse in January 2017, with the cessation of normal political activities, and NI has had no devolved government since (2017–). At the time of writing, the region remains something of a political vacuum, with seemingly intractable problems.

Local Media: PSM, democracy and the public sphere

In its report on the *Future for local and regional media* in the UK, the House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee stated:

Local media performs numerous functions in society. It scrutinises and holds to account local authorities and institutions, it informs people of news and events in their communities, and it forms part of the local identity of an area”. House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2010, 3)

As a summarising statement, the MPs on the committee offer an effective starting point in outlining why local media matter: in large part, local media provide “democratic accountability” for political institutions operating at a local level (House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2010, para. 87). Moreover, the democratic and social importance of local media are frequently highlighted for their important role in the public sphere, where they are “essential to community solidarity, identity, and everyday life” (Ali, 2016, 109); and where, similarly, local media – such as local newspapers – are seen as being important tools to inform the public about local politics (Nielsen, 2016, 844).

An empirical intervention regarding what local media can provide, vis-à-vis national media, comes from audience research by Costera Meijer (2010) in relation to the public broadcaster AT5, a local television station based in Amsterdam. She found seven characteristics of the station’s programming relating to the importance of local media:

1) supplying background information ...; (2) fostering social integration, or giving citizens insight into how the city “works”; (3) providing inspiration; (4) ensuring representation ...; (5) increasing local understanding; (6) creating civic memory; and (7) contributing to social cohesion, or a sense of belonging. (Costera Meijer, 2010: 327).

To greater or lesser degrees, these characteristics contribute to the public sphere, the space in society where the public can access information circulating in the media system, and where public opinion is formed (Habermas, 2006). Local media contribute to a well-functioning public sphere as they can greatly increase the plurality of news providers – argued to be beneficial to democracy (Napoli, 2017, 377) – as citizens are exposed to various viewpoints, rather than a more limited range as would be the case in their absence.

Given the strong theoretical basis for local media’s role, scholars have addressed how its continuation might be argued for in an era of decline. Ali (2016) suggests that local journalism should be described as a *merit good* rather than a *public good*, with news often rather considered the latter. Public goods are seen as those which are “non-rivalrous” – where “one person’s consumption does not detract from another’s” (Picard

and Pickard, 2017, 14) – and “non-excludable”, where “any purchaser and each nonexcluded beneficiary get roughly the same type of benefit from the good” (Baker as quoted in Ali, 2016, 110). However, for Ali while:

public goods demand intervention only to the point that they continue to be consumed. ... In contrast, merit goods are based on a normative assumption that the good should be provided regardless of consumption habits. (2016, 107)

Moreover, merit goods are those:

which society requires (such as healthcare services), but which individuals typically undervalue (are unable or unwilling to pay for), and thus the market underproduces. (Picard and Pickard, 2017, 15)

For Ali (2016, 107), local journalism is of such “social democratic importance” that the merit good argument makes allowance for its continuation, even when audience consumption of local news is in decline (Ali, 2016, 106).

Decline of the Local Press

Local media, especially those provided by the market, have been buffeted by a range of problems in recent years. Local media have faced limitations in staffing levels and resources (Nielsen, 2015, 13), meaning journalists are “stretched thin” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, 802). In the UK, the demise of the local press is exemplified in the massive decline in circulations, and in the fracturing of the business model underpinning many local newspapers. Between 1985 and 2005 the UK lost 401 local newspapers, despite sales peaking in 1989 (when each week there were nearly 48 million sold, an astonishingly high figure for a country the size of the UK) (Franklin, 2006, 5). Between 2005 and 2018, a further two hundred or more local newspapers have closed, with 58 per cent of the UK population now estimated to have no local daily or regional newspaper (Hutton, 2018). Despite this, ten local newspapers were launched in the UK in 2017 (Kakar, 2018). The sector has also witnessed massive financial losses with the publisher Reach plc (formerly known as Trinity Mirror), writing down the value of its local news assets by £150m (Sweney, 2018).

In NI, the local press (including the regional press) has faced major problems, especially in declining readership. McLaughlin (2006, 61) noted that in 2006 NI had 73 weekly newspapers in a society with fewer than a million adults. Many local newspapers in NI are targeted at either Nationalist or Unionist readerships, but not both, lessening competition and duplicating provision (McLaughlin, 2006, 61). In the intervening years, figures have declined further with the closure of eleven local newspapers for financial reasons in 2017 alone (BBC News, 2017). This is also the case for the three NI-published newspapers which are available across region, the *Belfast*

Telegraph, the *Irish News*, the *News Letter*, and the *Sunday Life* (a Sunday-only publication). The circulations of these publications have dramatically declined each year. However, the decline is most striking when 2018 figures are compared to those from 2005 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Northern Ireland Published Regional Newspapers: Daily/Sunday-Only

Newspaper	2005 Circulations	July– December 2018 Circulations	2017–2018 Change in Circulations	2005–2018 Change in Circulations
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	94,000	33,951	-6.7 per cent	-63.9 per cent
<i>Irish News</i>	>48,000	32,315	-5.2 per cent	-32.7 per cent
<i>News Letter</i>	29,000	12,499	-8.8 per cent	-56.9 per cent
<i>Sunday Life</i>	84,082	30,435	-7.5 per cent	-63.8 per cent

Sources (and percentage-change calculations based on): Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2019; McLaughlin, 2006, 61.

One issue for the daily and Sunday regionals in NI is that they face competition from sales of both UK and ROI newspapers. This group includes the *Daily Mirror* and the ROI Newspaper *The Sunday World*, which publish versions specifically for readers in NI. Online, there has been differentiation of regional news provision, with digital-only, local providers launching websites: these include *The Detail*, a not-for-profit venture which has been funded by the public, private and philanthropic sectors; and *Belfast Live*, which is published by Reach plc.

Broadcast Media in Northern Ireland

Compared to the decline of the local press, the audience for PSM has remained relatively stable. Audiences are served by the UK’s commercial public service broadcasters, Channel 3 (UTV in NI), Channel 4 and Channel 5. However, it is the BBC which is the main PSM provider in NI. In television, local “opt outs” appear on BBC One and BBC Two, with a significant BBC newsroom based in Belfast. In terms of BBC radio, NI is served, in addition to network services by two stations: BBC Radio Ulster and BBC Radio Foyle, important providers of public service radio in the midst of the region’s social and political division (Ramsey, 2016).

Audiences in NI are also served by ROI PSM services through cross-border media consumption (Ramsey, 2015). Today, access to the ROI's PSM services in NI is based on a mixture of formal and informal arrangements, whereby there is formal provision in some cases, while in others "signal slippage" provides a solution. In addition to the largest ROI PSM organisation RTÉ, TG4 (*Teilifís na Gaeilge*) produces programmes mainly in Irish. The aforementioned GFA made provision to achieve "more widespread availability of Teilifís na Gaeilge in Northern Ireland" (NIO, 1998). In terms of consumption, broadly similar patterns to those among audiences in Great Britain are observable. However, statistics on NI's radio audience indicate nine per cent of its listening is taken up by "other" programming (neither BBC, national commercial, nor local commercial) (Ofcom, 2018, 39). This figure can perhaps be attributed to those listening to stations broadcast from the ROI. With regards to television, a significant proportion of NI's population also watch ROI television channels either every day (eg. RTÉ 1: 10 per cent) or at least every week (eg. RTÉ 1: 17 per cent) (Ofcom, 2018, 19).

Language Policy and Public Broadcasting, 1998-2018

Another particular aspect of the local media landscape is the provision of minority languages through public service provision. In order to provide context we now turn to address debates on language policy, which since the establishment of NI have often been dominated by questions of identity. Irish, and more recently, Ulster-Scots have acted as one of the many symbols of cultural difference between the Nationalist and Unionist communities in the region. While Irish is a Celtic language from the same language family as Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, Ulster-Scots might be attributed a more "disputed" status linguistically. While some linguists consider Ulster-Scots as a language in its own right, others view it merely as a dialect of English. What is clear is that there is a strong Scottish influence on Ulster's vernacular speech, especially in North Antrim, due to long-standing cultural connections between Ulster and Scotland. Consequently, the Ulster-Scots language tradition and wider cultural identity have become more visible in the region in the past twenty years (McDermott, 2019).

While English is the primary vehicle of communication in NI, affinity towards Irish or Ulster-Scots is still considered as a declaration of political loyalty (McCall, 2002; Nic Craith, 2003). Balancing these sensitive identity questions is central to the development of language policy in a post-conflict society which has ostensibly placed "parity of esteem" at its core (Nic Craith, 2003). While there exist some examples of cross-community language learning, such as small groups of Protestant learners of Irish (see Mitchell and Miller, 2019), the language issue remains contentious overall, particularly among the political hierarchy.

In the 1970s, a range of developments to improve the situation for both languages occurred at the grass roots level, while from the mid-1980s onwards in the context of wider European regionalism, the question of minority language rights gained

prominence. The establishment of the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council in the early 1990s indicated a more formal approach within this language movement, while Irish also gained some ground due to the efforts of earlier community activists. This initial period of activism provided a starting point for the current context of minority language recognition in the public sphere with Irish undeniably achieving wider visibility – as exemplified by the inclusion of a census question in 1991.

However, more organised approaches to policy came after the 1998 Agreement which determined to promote “respect, understanding and tolerance” for linguistic diversity in NI, in relation “to Irish, Ulster-Scots and the languages of various ethnic communities” (NIO, 1998). While supporters of minority languages might bemoan what they deem a continued poor level of provision, the 1998 Agreement’s “language clause” acted as a point of reference for policy makers in post-conflict NI (McMonagle and McDermott, 2014). These developments have had implications on the ways that minority languages appear in the local media environment, which has seen a moderate growth in minority language coverage. An influential international dimension in the form of the (Council of Europe’s) European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, ratified by the UK in 2001, has also raised awareness of minority language rights and coverage in broadcasting. The charter provides an international monitoring process for minority language provision throughout the continent. On several occasions, the Charter’s committee of experts in its reports has provided critical commentary on the levels of broadcasting for Irish and Ulster-Scots and has provided pressure for the alleviation of shortcomings in this and other areas (CoE, 2014, 37). As Brexit will not affect the UK’s ratification of the Charter, this international document will continue to act as an international monitoring agent of the minority language broadcasting landscape.

Since 1998, however, the political landscape has also shifted significantly, which has had consequences for language policy in broadcasting. For instance, in NI, the Legislative Assembly was suspended from late 2002 until 2007 amidst political instability. In the attempts to reinstate governance, the less moderate parties Sinn Féin and the DUP gained ground and in such a charged environment both Ulster-Scots and Irish became even more politically expedient (McDermott, 2019). The DUP, as a means of further balancing provisions made to Irish-speakers in the 1998 Agreement, achieved certain stipulations for Ulster-Scots in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement – an accord which would eventually lead to the restoration of devolved power in 2007. Likewise, the Nationalist parties, especially Sinn Féin, have aimed to further consolidate the position of the Irish language. Indeed, the discourse of political elites on all sides, during this period and beyond, has often hidden the efforts of many individual activists who prefer a more politically neutral debate on linguistic diversity.

The 2006 St Andrews Agreement was, therefore, significant and led to what might be described as a second phase in the language policy debate from that initiated in 1998. For instance, there were further statements with regard to the promotion of Irish

through the proposed introduction of an Irish Language Act. Commitments were also made to “*enhance and develop* the Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture” (UK Government [our emphasis], 2006) which was a shift from the GFA’s more ambiguous reference to Ulster-Scots. For Ulster-Scots, additional obligations were placed on authorities to further a strategy for wider recognition in areas such as broadcast media. Subsequently, in 2011, a Ministerial Advisory Group for Ulster-Scots was established to advise on policy change.

The key issue of contention, however, has remained the introduction of the proposed legal framework for Irish which has not been implemented due to objections, mainly from Unionist parties. The unsuccessful attempts to introduce legislation was one cited feature of Sinn Féin’s withdrawal from government in January 2017. Ensuing campaigns at a community level, spearheaded by organisations such as *Conradh na Gaeilge* (The Gaelic League), have indicated that this is an issue which will continue to place language and identity politics at the centre of political debate for years to come.

Minority Language provision in broadcasting

Today, audiences in NI are served by a developing provision in Irish and Ulster-Scots. Language activists, however, often argue that broadcasting for minority languages in other parts of the UK is vastly superior with dedicated television and radio stations for both Scottish Gaelic and Welsh. The availability of TG4 from the ROI provides the most substantial service in Irish, while local BBC services, along with RTÉ provision, also offer programmes in Irish for speakers in NI. In relation to specific BBC coverage, the first programmes in the Irish language appeared on Radio Ulster in 1981, and were followed ten years later with the first television broadcast (McDermott, 2007). The contemporary picture is that a number of Irish language programmes are broadcast on television (eg. *Gaeilge* Collection (BBC, 2018b)), while a wider range and more regular set of programmes are broadcast on BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, with the half-hour slot following 7pm usually reserved in the schedules for Irish language programming.

Ulster-Scots provision on television is slightly different, as much of what the BBC terms Ulster-Scots output includes programming on culture (such as poetry, music and dance), but is broadcast in English (BBC, 2018c). On BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, audiences are served by the weekly magazine-style programme *Kintra*. However, to underline that minority language provision is not simply the preserve of PSM, one Ulster-Scots community radio station fUse FM broadcasts from Ballymoney in Co. Antrim (akin to community Irish language community provision, such as Raidió Fáilte). Outside of public service media provision, an alternative funding scheme is available to Irish and Ulster-Scots through a dedicated Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF) and an Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund (USBF) which are both administered by the screen agency, Northern Ireland Screen.

PSM provision for local news and minority language provision: the merit goods argument

When the issue of the decline of the local press is surveyed, NI is in a similar situation to the rest of the UK, with many newspapers in *significant* if not *terminal* decline. By contrast, PSM provision and consumption has remained relatively stable throughout this period, with the BBC in particular providing programming and services that are intrinsic to the functioning of the public sphere in NI (Ramsey, 2016, 2017). PSM services can help ameliorate the effect of the decline of the local press, with Nielsen (2015, 3) suggesting that licence-fee funded PSM providers “face fewer challenges to their resource base (though in some cases well-known political pressures)”, with the proviso that “like their commercial counterparts, they generally provide more regional news than genuinely local news”. Indeed, BBC Northern Ireland conducts its news gathering and broadcasts in a way which is aimed at the whole NI population: while stories are gathered by a number of “district journalists”, they cannot replicate what, at least in ideal circumstances, local newspapers might publish. That said, services provided by BBC Northern Ireland have remained relatively stable while the local and regional newspaper sector has been in significant decline.

One way to bridge the gap between the resource bases of PSM organisations and the local press is through schemes like the one launched in 2017 between the BBC and the News Media Association, whereby 150 local democracy reporters “to cover council and public meetings across the UK” were funded by the BBC (at a maximum of £8m per year), and are employed within local news organisations (BBC, 2017). As a form of information subsidy (Gandy, 1982), the scheme represents a major policy shift following many years of criticism that the BBC operations at a local level had been harming the local press, and instead offers a way in which PSM can support local news provision. Following on from this, the *Cairncross Review* (2019, 11) – set up to address the sustainability of journalism in the UK – recommended that “Direct funding for local public-interest news” be increased. Citing the BBC scheme, Cairncross suggested that an Institute for Public Interest News could be set up, which in the case of ongoing financial problems in the sector:

might become a rough equivalent to the Arts Council, channelling a combination of public and private finance into those parts of the industry it deemed most worthy of support. (Cairncross Review, 2019, 11)

We now seek to apply Ali’s (2016) argument on local journalism as a merit good, as a means of arguing that PSM’s role in local media provision in NI should be viewed as a merit good. In his account, Ali (2016) draws examples from media policy; for our context, we apply the framework first to local media, and second, in particular, to language provision in order to suggest that PSM offer a way of ensuring continued provision in both of these areas. First, on current trends, it can be postulated that local media in the private sector will continue to decline. While the BBC local democracy reporting scheme will help ameliorate the decline, it is to PSM-provided news that the

merit good argument can be most readily applied: in this sense, it is normatively preferential for BBC News Northern Ireland, the PSM news-element of UTV, and TG4's Irish language *Nuacht*/news services to have their budgets for news protected and indeed grown. Moreover, with regards to the "normative assumption that the good should be provided regardless of consumption habits" (Ali, 2016, 107), the merit good argument can be used to deflect the threat that the moderate decline in consumption of PSM services might be used by less-than-supportive governments to scale back PSM funding and provision.

Second, PSM's role in relation to minority language provision in NI can be viewed through the lens of the merit goods argument. While there are the alternative funding streams of the ILBF and USBF available to broadcasters, it is PSM's role as the primary deliverer of minority language provision that makes most sense within this approach. While minority language provision might be undervalued by the audience, and underproduced if left to the market, the merit goods argument provides the basis for provision to remain in place (cf. Picard and Pickard, 2017, 15). Given that PSM organisations such as the BBC already allow for provision in areas of lower audience demand, it is within PSM that the realistic future for minority language broadcasting lies. While some provision will fall outside of PSM (such as the Irish language and Ulster-Scots radio stations we note above), the levels of funding and resources required to provide good levels of minority language provision can best be supported through PSM.

Conclusion

While we have employed the merit goods argument here to illustrate that PSM's role in local news and minority language provision is normatively important, that is not to say that it could not be improved upon. In news provision, BBC Northern Ireland could seek further areas for developing local news provision akin to that which is disappearing as local newspapers close (such as running BBC news webpages at a sub-level below the main BBC News webpage for Northern Ireland). Moreover, given the prominent role that minority languages play in the culture and politics of the region, BBC Northern Ireland provision could arguably be extended. Other options include taking better account of the all-island nature of broadcasting, such as exploring opportunities for greater activity in the area of NI-ROI PSM co-productions (Ramsey, 2015, 1204). We therefore do not argue that PSM is a perfect solution for the decline of local media, but it is the most fulfilling way that the merit goods argument can be grounded in actually-existing conditions. In NI, it is those PSM services which are presently delivering good levels of local news and minority language broadcasting that presents the best chance for the continuation of such services.

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